REFLECTIONS ON

MATTHEW 10:29-31

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Life keeps teaching me that a lot of people don't feel that they are worth much. I have read that many times: I have learned academically that self-esteem is essential to emotional health and joyful living. I have learned that strong people have a strong sense of their own value as persons, and that many of the people with major problems are the ones whose entire lives area kind of test track on which their manhood, or power, or worth must be proved daily.

But I continue to be amazed at the way life itself teaches me that in addition to all the psychology and theology in the books I happen to read. Let me illustrate by way of my own recent experiences.

Several weeks ago, I spent six days at the Institute for Advanced Pastoral Studies in Detroit. The event was called a Workshop in Personal Growth, and one of its objectives was to provide the opportunity for each participant to do some rather intense thinking and evaluating of himself. One of the devises employed was a trust group: four individuals who met together each evening. As initial input for discussion each person had to list on a large sheet of paper his strong points, capabilities, competencies, - what he could offer the group. On the other side we were to list those areas of ourselves where we sensed a need and where we wanted to do some growing. Just that much was a very interesting exercise, because it occured to me that most of us have been conditioned not to reveal either of these lists to anyone. I don't recall ever having to write down and then describe to others my strong points and capabilities. Needless to say, I'm not going to reveal the content of my list because you may want to take exception. Nor am I about to reveal my list of weaknesses because I suspect you may want to add a few items I have overlooked.

In any case the three other members of my strust group and I experienced a lot of discomfort in telling each other about what was good and strong in ourselves, more discomfort, interestingly, than we experienced in the process of talking about our weaknesses. This was particularly evident in the case of one man - whose positive list was sparse - but who was able to fill up a whole sheet and then some with negative comments about himself. He was a professor of religion at a small Southern college,

quite conservative theologically, about fifty years of age, partially paralyzed, and had an extremely difficult time moving about - although he had taught himself to do everything he needed to do. He was quiet, withdrawn, and he quickly let us know that life was in the process of falling apart for him. His wife of twenty five years had moved out and his three young sons had rejected him and moved out with their mother. This situation, in turn, he was sure, would result in his being fired by the college.

Little by little we got to know him and to see how he was destroying himself as a man. He was sure, for instance, that the failure in marriage and parenthood was his alone, and he kept asking us to tell him how to do better. We discovered ~~quickly~~ that his physical problem had caused him to assume over the years that he was unattractive to others: that he didn't even like to shake hands with other men. that he had never physically embraced his sons, and that he found physical contact with anyone, including his wife, very threatening - because - he assumed -others were repelled by him.

When we got in deeply and touched on theology he let us know ~~quickly~~ that he regarded his affliction and his current life situation as the working of God's will: that God wanted him to keep trying harder to overcome the obstacles which His will had constructed. At long last he was able to say what was really at the heart of the problem: he really didn't want to fight anymore - in fact, he didn't want to live anymore, because in all the world nobody seemed to care whether he lived or died.

I don't know what he's doing now, but I do know that after six days we were able to communicate that he mattered to us: and we were able to get him to fill out his list of strong points - and that he was able to laugh a little bit, and to let us hold doors for him - and that by the last day he was shaking hands with and touching everybody he could. And I'd like to think he knew that he mattered - which is really the essence of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

On the fourth day of the conference, after this intensive kind of ~~discussion~~ experience, we were taken to downtown Detroit and told to try to make contact with several city people in a way that communicated that they mattered. Now, nothing could be less appealing to me than that agenda. [redacted] I have been taught and conditioned not to talk to strangers, and nothing is more foreign to my personal style than striking up a conversation on a

street corner. In fact, I think all of us regard strangers as somewhat of a threat: if chance places us beside one on an airplane we pretend as if he isn't there as long as we can: if we are forced to talk we do so in the rituals of superficiality without revealing anything about ourselves. Sometimes experience teaches us that it's easier that way. On the way to Detroit I happened to sit beside a couple who had been celebrating the Indianapolis 500 for 48 hours or so, and who after ordering and quaffing two martinis turned and asked me what I did and where I was going. When I told them a great pall descended over the conversation which soon came to a halt. In any case, I don't talk to strangers much and I avoided doing it almost all day in Detroit. But finally I forced muself to approach a guard at the Art Museum: he was friendly but obviously a little suspicious about why I should be talking with him. After a painful couple of minutes I managed to turn the conversation to him - his family, how he liked being a guard: and discovered that he was an interesting person: a college drop-out who was part of the educated unemployed, who found an interest in African Art and hoped one day to become an attorney. We talked for 20 minutes or so: before we were done we had shown each other pictures of our families: and when I left he thanked me. He said no one - in all his time as a guard - had ever seemed interested in him as a person.

One more experience from Detroit: every night a group of ten of us went out for a sandwich - to the same restaurant. The waitress was quite cold and unfriendly and totally unresponsive to our attempts to joke and make small talk. After two nights, we asked her name and why she was so unresponsive. She revealed that her husband had just had a massive heart attack and was in the hospital and she just didn't feel very happy about anything. We expressed our concern: and the next night inquired about his condition. By the time the week was over she was waiting for us to arrive and anxious to share the news of the day from the hospital. When we told her on Friday that we wouldn't be in anymore - she seemed concerned and walked away returning a few minutes later with a cake for us - and tears in her eyes. Somehow we had communicated that she mattered - and that fact alone meant more to her than any of us imagined.

Life is full of that - and those kinds of people. Just last week I received an

emergency phone call to come to the hospital to talk with a young man who had tried to take his own life. I didn't know him: he didn't know me, but he quickly got to the point: nobody cares. When I told him I did, he rejected that with the statement "Nobody else does, why should you?"

Enough story-telling. Our society has trouble affirming the worth of the individual. Moving at break neck speed, growing by leaps and bounds, crowding into urban areas, changing, getting more complex, the individual doesn't seem to matter. Any kind of military policy that includes an "acceptable number of casualties" speaks eloquently about the ~~realm~~ value of the individual. Economic policy that regards a 5% unemployment rate as acceptable says something about the worth of individuals. The growing problem of ageing in our culture is only partially one of facilities and health care: mostly it's a problem of somehow affirming individual worth. A new organization has been formed - the 'Gray Panthers' - and that's really what it's about: a corporate pronouncement that "we are and we matter." The two phenomena of this year's primary election - George Wallace and George McGovern both seem to have struck a real need - the individual who wants the body politic to recognize that he matters/

At the bottom of it all is a question of theology and the answer is found in the Good News of the Gospel. I read this morning from the book of the prophet Jeremiah. Jeremiah was in deep trouble. He had pronounced the Lord's judgement against his own nation. And as a result was thrown in prison, flogged and abandoned by even his friends who had initiated a whispering campaign against him. In this terrible aloneness the prophet is moved to curse the day he was born - and for emphasis - to curse even the man who brought the news that he was born to his father.

Jeremiah was sustained through this crises only by his sense that though everyone else abandoned him, God had not. And that, I would suggest to you is what is good about the Good News: that is the saving knowledge of Jesus Christ: that is what he came to reveal about God.

He had to prepare his own disciples for the distinct possibility that they would be alone: that no one would care about them. And he did so by way of two unforgetable images. "Are not sparrows two a ~~penny~~ penny? Yet without your father's leave not a one of them falls to the ground. As for you, even the hairs of your head have been

counted . So have no fear: you are worth more than any number of sparrows." Mt.10:29-31

That, I think is the Gospel for our time. That is why we say a child's name as he is baptized - to affirm that he is important to us, but always and ultimately to God. That is w it is so very essential for people who belong to the church to learn to know each other and to be able to share with each other. Because we are called to give the good news of Jesus Christ to each other - by affirming our individual worth and value: by loving each other in a way that says you matter to someone - to God, and because of that, to me.

The most profound lessons of theology are learned in life - as I have tried to relate to you this morning. So, the greatest truth of the Gospel is experienced in life - when you and I sense that we matter in God's eyes: that we count, we have worth and value.

May you experience that Good News that salvation this morning. AMEN

Father, we are grateful for ourselves: for all you have made us, the potentials and abilities you have built into us. Help us to sense our own worthfulness. And help us to affirm the worth of each other. Through Jesus Christ our Lord. AMEN

AFFIRMATION OF FAITH - [illegible]